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Nexus of Raw with TTP and PTM: Are they two bodies with the same head and soul? (Part – I)

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Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is an umbrella organisation of various militant groups formed in 2007, under the leadership of Baitullah Mahsud, to unify opposition against the Pakistani Military. TTP's stated objectives were: the expulsion of Islamabad's influence in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), neighbouring Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province; and the implementation of a strict interpretation of sharia throughout Pakistan. The group also sought to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Pakistan, and the recent demands also include revoking the merger of FATA with KPK.¹ Since 2007, TTP has a history of conducting terrorist actions in Pakistan targeting Pakistan's military, law enforcement agencies (LEAs), general population including the cowardly terrorist attack on Army Public School, Peshawar in 2016 killing 144 innocent students and teachers.² Pakistan's military conducted a series of military operations against TTP including Operation Zarb-e-Azab, etc., which dismantled the organisation's infrastructure in Pakistan.³ The remnants of TTP fled and found refuge in Afghanistan. In the recent past, however, TTP has launched several terrorist attacks against Pakistan's military and LEAs including a suicide attack on a mosque in Peshawar on 30 January 2023 claiming more than 100 lives and even more wounded.⁴

Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) emerged from the Mehsud Tahafuz Movement in May 2014. It proclaims itself to be a social movement for the protection of Pashtun human rights, particularly in KPK and generally in Pakistan. PTM claims to be an unarmed and peaceful resistance movement working within the lawful boundaries of the Constitution of Pakistan.⁵ During PTM's public demonstrations and sit-ins since February 2018, several demands have been presented to the Pakistani government and military, including punishment to the retired police officer Rao Anwar, a truth and reconciliation commission on alleged extrajudicial killings and missing persons in the country, removal of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) set by terrorists from erstwhile FATA, removal of military check posts, etc.⁶

Irrespective of the genesis of TTP and PTM, it is very interesting to note the similarities between the two organisations albeit the former has a militant, and the latter has a political face.

First, both organisations target Pakistan's military and law enforcement agencies (LEAs) in their actions and rhetoric. As per the research by Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), TTP conducted 262 attacks in Pakistan including 14 suicide bombings only in 2022, claiming 415 lives. The number of attacks increased 25% from year 2021.⁷ Unlike TTP, PTM has adopted the route of a social movement to attack the military and LEAs through hate speeches and social media. Some of the international media streams also seem to be supportive of PTM rhetoric which creates a lot of suspicions among the intellectual and security establishment of Pakistan.⁸ In a particular incident on 27 May 2022, in North Waziristan, PTM protesters physically attacked an Army Check Post injuring 5 military personals.⁹

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Second, both organisations do not criticise each other rather they support each other in words and actions. Interestingly, with the rise of terrorist incidents in Pakistan since June 2022, PTM has not condemned these attacks at all. Instead, it has blamed Pakistan's military for the latest surge in terrorism. A senior member of PTM Sanna Ejaz, openly targets Pakistan's military and accuses them of human rights violations.¹⁰ A senior member of PTM, Ali Wazir, has consistently delivered hate speeches against the military and state institutions where he incited people to carry out attacks against them as well.¹¹

Third, both organizations take their manpower support from Pashtun tribes of newly merged districts (NMD) of KPK.¹² Although TTP's rallying cry is more religious in nature than PTMs pro-ethnic leanings, both appeal to the feelings of alleged mistreatment of Pashtuns during the period of military operations in erstwhile FATA. One should not be surprised if, in future, TTP also adopts a more Pashtun oriented rallying slogan.

Fourth, both organisations oppose the merger of FATA into KPK and demand the reversal of this policy decision, the removal of check posts from the FATA and for limiting the number of armed forces present in the area.¹³

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Fifth, there have always been irrefutable evidence for support of TTP by the Indian Intelligence Agency namely Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). In November 2020, Pakistan shared a dossier with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) containing evidence that India was sponsoring TTP to conduct attacks in Pakistan.¹⁴ In its latest effort, Pakistan shared another dossier with United Nations Security Council in December 2022 providing concrete evidence of Indian financial and material sponsorship to multiple terrorist organisations operating in Pakistan including TTP.¹⁵ However, the Government of Pakistan has yet to come out with clear-cut proof of funding to PTM by

hostile intelligence agencies. Although, in the past, ISPR has indicated towards RAW-PTM nexus, but there is a need for more clarity on the subject from the State of Pakistan.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the nexus between TTP and PTM is becoming very clear as both are working towards the same ends i.e., discredit and target Pakistan's military and the LEAs. Both organisations work hand in gloves just like two bodies with the same head (mastermind) i.e., RAW. On one hand, TTP conducts terrorist attacks against Pakistan's military and LEAs, and when the military conducts operations against the terrorists, PTM criticizes the military action and terms it as illegal and unfair targeting of the Pashtuns in the name of violation of so-called human rights. This narrative is also supported and propagated, wittingly or unwittingly, by a group of national and international media streams.¹⁷ All this indicates the fact that RAW is the mastermind behind these synchronized terrorist and social movement actions. It is due to the reason that only RAW possesses the financial and material resources along with the motive to carry out such hostile covert actions against the State of Pakistan.

The sole objective of the relationship of convenience between RAW-TTP-PTM is to discredit Pakistan's military and LEAs and thus destabilise the region. It must be understood that destabilisation of the region remains in the larger geo-strategic interests of US-India nexus within the global context of the US-China rivalry. How much facilitation does India get from the US in its support towards TTP and PTM is a question for Pakistani Intelligence Agencies to answer? It must be noted that RAW does not only support TTP or PTM; but it is actively supporting other terrorist proxies in Balochistan and Gilgit Baltistan which will be a subject of discussion for another paper. It is no coincidence that TTP and Baloch terrorist groups often target Chinese interests in Pakistan. No wonder that, in recent past, main target of ISKP in Afghanistan has been the Chinese nationals and their interests.¹⁸

Pakistan has successfully endured a long and hard fight against terrorism for more than twenty years. Pakistan's military, with support of the entire nation, has been able to dismantle terrorist networks inside

Pakistan.¹⁹ However, recent rise in terrorist incidents indicates the fact that whereas terrorists' physical infrastructure and large-scale grouping were successfully defeated through a series of military operations; the main source of terrorism i.e., foreign/external support to the terrorist groups could not be dismantled completely. Hence, as soon as the foreign funding and support to criminal/terrorist groups was resumed, post US withdrawal from Afghanistan and arrival of new politico-military leadership, the number of terrorist incidents rose sharply in Pakistan.²⁰

Moreover, the terrorist groups have also now morphed into more benign-looking political entities

like PTM to further their cause of destabilising Pakistan through propagating 'half-truths' only, which makes the job of counterterrorism even harder. In future, there may be several other political entities coming to the scene to further complicate the matters. Moreover, the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan has also changed the security paradigm in the region. Therefore, there is a need for Pakistan to re-assess its counterterrorism strategy in KPK and Balochistan. More on the proposed fresh counterterrorism strategy is given in the next part of the article.

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